

PERENNIAL RYEGRASS

Lolium perenne L.

plant symbol = LOPE

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Northeast Plant Materials Program

Uses

Perennial ryegrass is a valuable forage and soil stabilization plant. This species is the predominant forage grass in Europe, and has been used in the United States for forage and lawns. Generally speaking, the tetraploid cultivars are used for forage, and diploid cultivars are for lawns and conservation plantings. Users should double check the intended use of the available cultivars before buying seed. Italian ryegrass is primarily used for quick cover in erosion control plantings.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Description

Perennial ryegrass grows from 1 to 2 feet tall with a bunchy form, and has medium longevity. Some turf varieties are longer lived. There are numerous long, narrow, stiff leaves near the base of the plant. The under surfaces of leaves are bright, glossy, and smooth. Inflorescence stems are nearly naked. Seedheads are spikes with spikelets growing edgewise to the seedhead stem. Seeds do not have awns (bristles). There are approximately 230,000 seeds per pound.

Italian ryegrass is quite similar to perennial ryegrass except it is an annual or biennial, depending on climate and/or length of growing season. It may grow a little taller than perennial ryegrass: from 2 to 3 feet tall. The seeds of this sub-species have awns.

Adaptation

These grasses have a wide range of adaptability to soils, but thrive best on dark rich soils in regions having mild climates. They do not withstand hot, dry weather or severe winters. They will stand fairly wet soils with reasonably good surface drainage.

Perennial ryegrass is distributed throughout the entire United States. For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Website.

Establishment

A fine, firm seedbed gives the best results. Mulched seedlings on graded soil germinate readily. Spring seedlings of ryegrass may occur in March, April, or May. Perennial ryegrass may also be seeded mid-August to early September. Seeding rates will vary with local conditions and purpose of plantings. Generally, a rate of 20 to 25 pounds per acre is used if ryegrass is seeded alone. Lesser amounts per acre are used in mixtures, depending upon uses and companion species. Do not exceed 4 pounds per acre in mixes with alfalfa.

Management

Ryegrass is generally cut for hay when seed is in the soft-dough stage. Ryegrass responds well to good management, such as intensive rotational grazing and fertilizer applications.

Pests and Potential Problems

This section is under development.

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

Ryegrasses cross-pollinate freely so many types have developed. It is difficult to maintain their genetic purity; consequently, Italian ryegrass is marketed as common ryegrass or domestic ryegrass, and it is often a mixture of annual and perennial species. There is no certification of this seed since pure varieties of Italian ryegrass are almost non-existent.

There are many cultivars of perennial ryegrass available for turf application. Newer turf-type cultivars are often intentionally infected with an endophytic fungus to improve stress-tolerance. Tetraploid forage cultivars also abound.

Seed of cultivars and common annual ryegrass is readily available from local commercial suppliers.

Prepared By & Species Coordinator:

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS <<http://plants.usda.gov>> and Plant Materials Program Web sites <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>.

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